

The Mint Museum celebrates the life of Dr. Francis Robicsek, a pioneering heart surgeon, art collector and Renaissance man

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It is with heavy—yet grateful—hearts that The Mint Museum recognizes and celebrates the life and legacy of Dr. Francis Robicsek, who passed away peacefully at his Charlotte home on April 3, at the age of 94.

Robicsek was best known for being a world-renowned heart surgeon who performed some of Charlotte's first open-heart operations. Over his 64-year career, he performed the city's first heart transplant, founded the Sanger Clinic (now Atrium Health Sanger Heart & Vascular Institute), and was known for his steady hand — and improvisation — in some extraordinary situations. (Consider this: On New Year's Eve in 1964, when a fellow doctor's heart stopped on a hospital elevator, [Robicsek proceeded to cut the man's chest open with suture scissors, massage the heart, and then shock it back into rhythm with the cord from a table lamp.](#))

But the doctor who fled Soviet control in his native country of Hungary in 1956 with his six-months-pregnant wife, Lilly, was also a student of the world. Robicsek saw beauty in the old and was an avid art collector who generously helped establish, grow and develop the Mint's pre-Columbian, Spanish Colonial, and European painting collections. Many of the works of art are on display in Mint Museum Randolph's Lilly and Francis Robicsek Galleries.

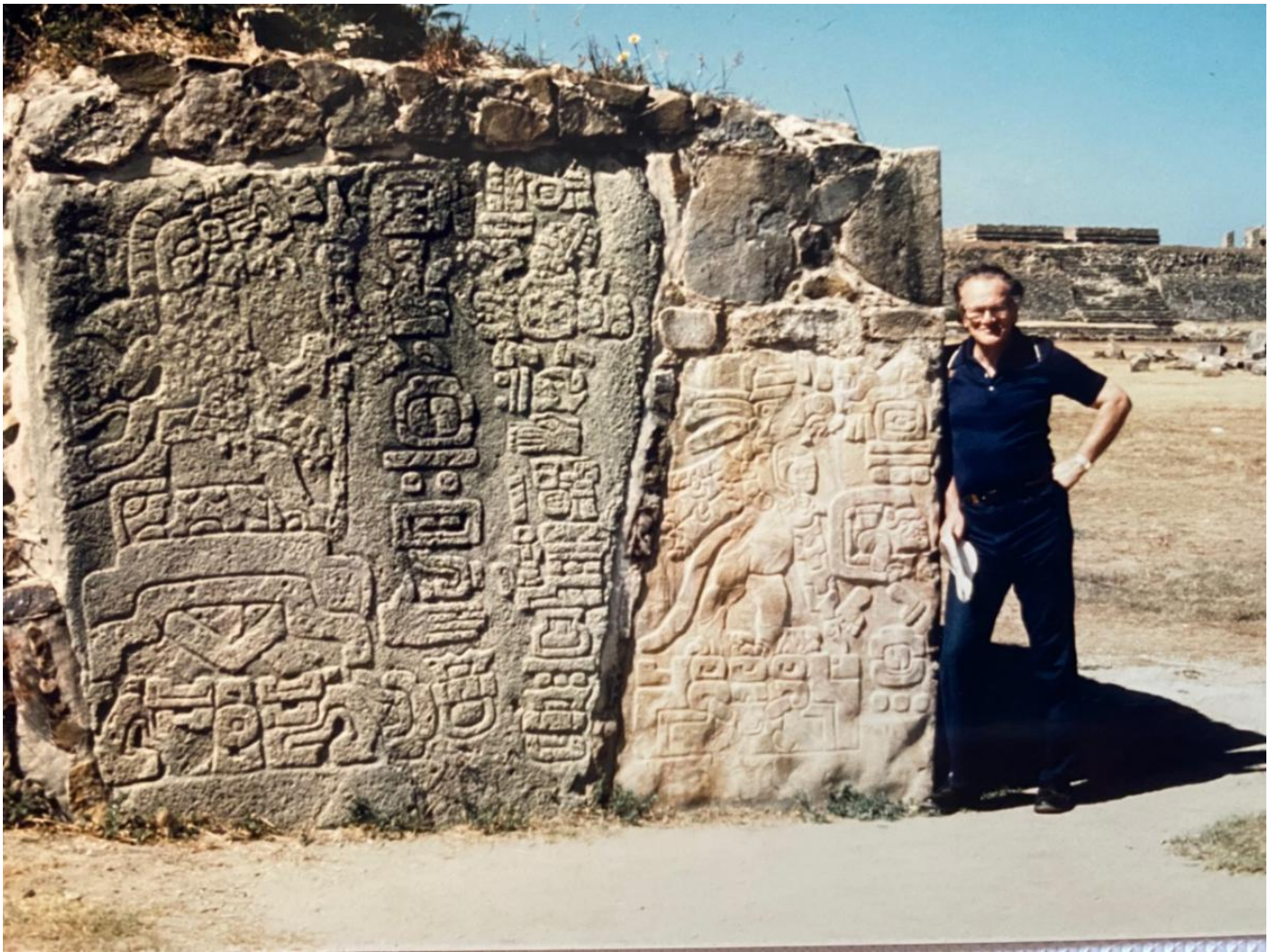
"I only had the pleasure of meeting Dr. Robicsek once, but he was a figure who had an aura of well-deserved respect, almost reverence," says Mint President and CEO Todd A. Herman, PhD. "And if you paid attention, he had a sense of humor that those willing to see past the aura would appreciate—with a twinkle in his eye and a slight rise to the edges of his mouth."

Robicsek became interested in archaeology in the 1960s. "I have never enjoyed a vacation where you just go and sit around, and I have never enjoyed walking around a golf course," Robicsek wrote in the 2008 book *Pioneers of Cardiac Surgery*, by Dr. William S. Stoney. "I have always needed an excuse or a reason for going from A to B." So it was auspicious when Robicsek saw an ad in the *Annals of Thoracic Surgery* for a hospital in Honduras that needed a surgeon with experience in tuberculosis surgery. Robicsek began spending summer vacations there. And when the hospital could only handle one thoracotomy per day, he spent his downtime "prowling around the ruins."



For decades, Robicsek worked to expand healthcare facilities and operations in Central American countries, including Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Belize and El Salvador. He helped build pediatric and neonatal intensive care units, and he raised money to take pieces of equipment deemed obsolete by U.S. standards and have them refurbished and shipped to Central America, where he'd also train staff how to use them. Then, whenever possible, Robicsek would change out of his scrubs, pull out his camera, and go exploring.

Of course, he couldn't have done it without Lilly. A medical doctor herself—she did two residencies in pathology and pediatrics—Lilly retired from medicine to help raise the four children and afford her husband the opportunity to work, study and travel around the world, often with Lilly by his side.



Dorie Reents-Budet, PhD—a former visiting curator for native art of the Americas at the Mint—spent years working with Robicsek and exploring his vast collection. But they first met in 1982 when Robicsek attended the Maya Hieroglyphic Workshop at the University of Texas at Austin. Reents-Budet was a graduate student at the time and was helping put on the workshop.

The crowd was an insular group of art history and anthropology scholars from the U.S. and Canada. Reents-Budet, eager to make sure all attendees felt welcome, offered to drive Robicsek to all of the after-hours workshop cocktail parties, to introduce him to her professors. “It was memorable getting him to fold up those long legs so he could fit in my 1967 Nova,” she says.

Robicsek authored five books on Mayan culture and art, and just as he was a pioneer in the medical field, he was also an early adopter in the field of art history. He was publishing books on pre-Columbian art long before the National Gallery of Art even recognized it as art and not just a facet of anthropology, says Reents-Budet. To Robicsek, she adds, these works were equally as poignant as any Grecian ceramic, Egyptian artifact, or Renaissance painting.



Michael Tarwater, formerly the president and CEO of Carolinas Healthcare System, first met Robicsek in June 1981. Tarwater was a vice president at the time and part of his purview included overseeing the hospital's cath lab, where doctors studied the heart. He and Robicsek became fast friends, and for a period of about 15 years, Tarwater and his wife, Ann, would travel the world with Robicsek and Lilly—from Romania, where the ancient monasteries are painted with exquisite Biblical scenes, to Antigua, Guatemala, home of the world's largest Easter celebration.

"To the very end, he had this beautiful youthful curiosity about life that you just wanted to tap into," says Ann Tarwater, one of the Mint's Board of Trustees. "He wanted to show you the world."

That sense of curiosity didn't wane after Robicsek retired in 1998. If anything, it picked up. "He was an inventor, an innovator, a scientist, a scholar, a humanitarian," says Michael Tarwater. "And," he added, "a prankster."

In the mid-1980s, Carolinas Medical Center experienced a few power failures, which always caused a scramble, Tarwater said. A few days after one, the hospital administration announced to staff that they'd found the problem and resolved it. Afterward, Robicsek stopped by Tarwater's office for a quick chat.

Minutes after Robicsek left, Tarwater saw the power go out yet again. "The first thing you think about are all the people in the operating room, all the things we rely on, all the people on ventilators," he said.

Frantic, Tarwater raced out of his office. That's when he realized that the power outage was isolated. The mischievous Robicsek had found the circuit breaker for just the administrative offices and flipped the switch.



Francis and Lily Robicsek took every opportunity to travel with their children—Steven, Susanne, John and Frances—and later with their five grandchildren. They instilled a love

of art, music and culture in all of them.

Robicsek's daughter Frances Furr, the youngest of the four children, studied art history in college and went on to be an art teacher, a member of the Delhom Service League, and a docent at the Mint.

Furr recalls the time when, as a lover of North Carolina ceramics, she took her father to Seagrove to view the pottery. "In that thick Hungarian accent, he said, 'There aren't any cracks in it. I don't like it,'" Furr recalls, laughing.

He later recanted, she says, but his premise remained: There was beauty and value in old things. Whether traveling the world with family and friends or simply browsing a flea market or art gallery with his children, Robicsek espoused the power of learning about the past, of finding beauty in artifacts.

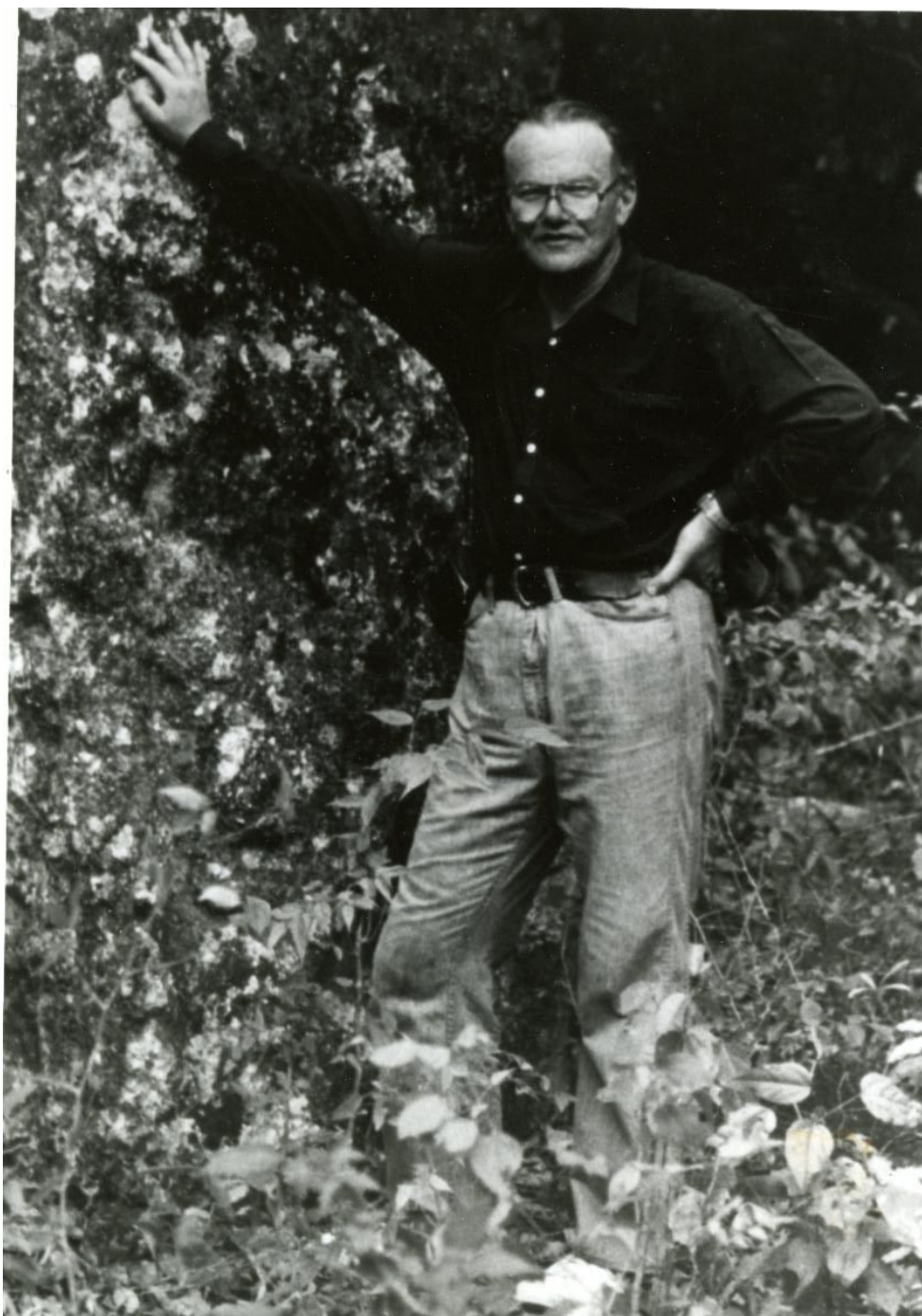
Two weeks before her wedding day, 27 years ago, Robicsek took Furr to the jungles of Mexico, where he was on a mission to photograph Mayan ruins. There were no hot showers, they slept in hammocks, and she remembers looking out the back of a truck and realizing they weren't on a road. But then they arrived at the most amazing old mounds in the middle of nowhere.

"I love how he taught me to see life through the lens of culture and art," says Furr. "And that I'm very grateful for."

We at the Mint are also grateful to Robicsek and his family for sharing the life and legacy of the remarkable doctor, buried in his scrubs, who saved lives and championed art in equal measure.

Sincerely,

Todd A. Herman, PhD
President & CEO



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